Jim McKay and Gregg Berninger

Interpreting Servants at the Martin Van Buren NHS

Martin Van Buren National Historic Site (NHS), located in Kinderhook, New York, preserves and interprets the 36-room mansion, the centerpiece of the 220-acre working farm that President Martin Van Buren (1782-1862) named "Lindenwald" after the linden trees on the property. The eighth president retumed to the town he grew up in and established his own home and farm there at the end of his one term in the White House in 1841. Van Buren spent the last 21 years of his life at Lindenwald as an elder statesman, avid farmer, fisherman, and horseman. He died there in July 1862, having lived and risen to political prominence during nearly 80 formative years in the establishment of the Republic—from the end of the War for Independence to the beginning of the Civil War.

Since the beginning, the National Park Service has been committed to interpreting the servants' role in the composition of life at Lindenwald. The staff at the Martin Van Buren NHS has published articles in scholarly journals and in local newspapers and brought these integral members of the household to life on their guided tours. To accurately represent the servants is to accurately represent the president, his life, and his times. Five areas in the home lend themselves directly to interpreting the servants; most rangers refer to the predominantly female staff throughout the mansion.

The first area is the servants' dining room, located in the unusually bright and airy basement, where we first introduce the visitor to the four or five Irish women who worked in the home as well as the man or two who may have also been domestic workers. The dining room is an appropriate place to talk about the potato famine that delivered so many Irish to our shores and how they would have sent a large portion of their monthly salary of five or so dollars back to Ireland to help bring another family member across the Atlantic. We also often mention how the nearest Catholic church was 10 miles away in Chatham, which would have prevented them from attending formal worship, a great hardship indeed. The dining room is decorated with cheerful wallpaper and sports an attractive, yet inexpensive at the time, set of Flow Blue China from the Davenport company in England. It is a most pleasant atmosphere where the servants could relax—at least until the call bell rang.

The kitchen, also in the basement, is next on the tour. We see Van Buren's epicurean flair—and how the cook would have to have been a marvel to have satisfied his taste! Here Van Buren brought his morning catch of rainbow trout from the Kinderhook creek for the cook to prepare for breakfast. In the kitchen, we tell how the cook would have judged when the Dutch-style brick oven was hot enough to bake in. Imitating the cook, we bend down, insert our right arm in the oven, and start to count. By pulling away on the count of three, we demonstrate the 19th-century technique for high temperature measurement.

The laundry room, next on the tour, is possibly the best place to illuminate another element of the president's character with a servant's activity. Mr. Van Buren enjoyed wearing rather fancy clothing. For this he was often mocked by his Whig opponents as being a "dandy." The Italian ruffle iron found in this room shows visitors how meticulous the laundress had to be to provide for Van Buren's sartorial splendor. The toil of the laundress—filling and emptying copper boilers with water, agitating the wash by hand, maintaining the fires to heat the water and the irons in all seasons, hanging clothes to dry, ironing and folding clothes and, at the end of the day, waiting on tables—is detailed in this room.

In the cook's bedroom, we ask why the cook was the only domestic who slept in the cellar. Most visitors will correctly guess part of the answer; that is, that the cook had to rise early to prepare breakfast. With a bit of prodding, it will usually occur to them that the cook also would have had to get up early to start the fires in the oven and the coal cook range and to keep the coal burning hot air furnace stoked throughout the night. Here we also mention that most of the servants slept on the third floor of the home. Leaving the cook's bedroom, visitors are frequently asked to compare it to the family's bedrooms seen later in the tour.

The way back to the first floor from the basement is, most conveniently, the beginning of the servants' staircase. Once the first floor is reached, visitors look up at the remainder of the 88-step staircase that served as the main means of transportation for the servants. The staircase, located in the tower, gave the servants access to the first, second, and third floors. The visual impact of this seemingly endless staircase, along with our description of what servants carried up and down the staircase while wearing long skirts, dramatizes the hard work that servants did in the house.

Visitors find the domestic side of the story at Lindenwald appealing and easy to relate to. In addition, by understanding the domestic servants at President Van Buren's home, visitors have a fuller understanding of the president's life here—an important part of our history.

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